

CIRCLES OF COURAGE

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Abstract

Through the lens of the Circle of Courage model of positive youth development, the author reflects on the nature of conversations that are taking place between adults and youth participating in “Connecting Generations”, a school district program in its fifth year in the Southern Gulf Islands of British Columbia in which adults and youth have face to face conversations about interests, skills and life experiences.

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Sacred Circles

Connecting Generations is a school district program in the Gulf Islands of southern British Columbia in its fifth year of delivery. Its goal is to bring together youth and adults for face-to-face conversations about mutual interests, skills and life experiences. Its tagline is “*Connect, Share, Learn, Give*”.

To begin with, we arranged for conversations to take place between students and seniors who told their stories of serving in the Second World War or living in poverty during the Depression. History and Socials students listened with amazement to the details of everyday life in times of hardship. Animating the history that students were learning about in the classroom, these first-hand accounts were powerful, yet even from the onset there were signs it was the shared human experience that meant the most. For example a student whose father had died when he was seven met a 90 year old who had lost her husband when her son was only three. This was the common ground on which they met and from where they travelled forth together in the journey of exploring her past, how it related to his present and how that might affect the future for them both.

Conversation is not just what is said; it is also what happens between people. Conversation is not always about an event or a time; it is part of a much larger process of change. It leads to more conversation and is part of a journey to understand.¹

Connecting Generations soon became an “umbrella” housing a number of initiatives, with the common thread of bringing together unrelated youth and adults whose paths may not otherwise cross. Over time and through reflection, we have seen the extent to which these intergenerational conversations are opportunities for deep learning.

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The *Bridging the Gap*² forums in 2010-2011 gave adult and youth participants the chance to talk about the rewards and challenges of specific professions, to hear stories of career paths, to share the hopes and expectations as well as the doubts and fears of both those already in the field and those contemplating entering it.

By means of a few questions colourfully presented and decorated with appropriate quotations that acted as catalysts for conversation, those in attendance could talk about what mattered to them. Questions varied at each forum E.g.

Success

What does success mean to you?

Rewards

What rewards do you find as a health/helping practitioner? /

What rewards do you anticipate?

Concerns and challenges

What are some of your concerns about being an entrepreneur or making a living in the arts?

Change

How do you deal with change in your life/in your business?

Values

What are some of the ways you see your values affecting a business? /

How have your values influenced your business?

Self-care

How do you take care of yourself?

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Through *Building the Bridge*³, the following year, we observed how adults and youth inspire one another through intergenerational collaboration. The project involved a team of local web site designers, photographers and graphic designers and a group of high school students and university graduates designing and creating a program brochure and website for Connecting Generations. Working together on specific tasks gave participants the opportunity to explore the creative potential of cooperation between different generations.

They described their experience of attending focus group sessions thus:

It has made me aware that it is important to brainstorm ideas with people of different ages. (Web site designer)

After this group work I think I will look differently at working with adults because it was a lot of fun (Grade 10 student)

Participants were impressed by the way in which “*Youth and adults [worked] together in a focused creative way*”.

Through this project we found that, rather than blurring the lines between school and community⁴, youth and adults, teachers and students, *Connecting Generations* was facilitating the creation of a “Third Space”⁵ where members of different generations meet and form a new relationship related to the space they have shared and the dialogue in which they have engaged.

It was the realization that we were not attempting to bridge a gap in order to cross to the other side that led to *Making Space*, a project whose goal was the creation of mentor

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support resources. Instead we were building a bridge, a new place where those from either side of a “Generation Gap” can meet and enter a “Third Space” in which to connect, share, learn and give.

Three years ago we started an intergenerational writers’ group, intentionally creating a meeting place for writers of different ages and different backgrounds, based on the practices of Writing Alone Together⁶ – writing freely, reading aloud, listening deeply and bearing witness. The Writers’ Group is “*like a little family*”:

*A place where stories are told, spoken and heard... somewhere we can teach and learn from each other... a space for exploring the possibilities for what we feel, believe, love, care about and want for ourselves and the world.*⁷

What makes these “Third Spaces” of Connecting Generations into Circles of Courage and how is this different from the educational mainstream?

Connect/Belonging

Fostering a sense of belonging is fundamental to every initiative under the Connecting Generations “umbrella”. Each youth and adult who participates in any aspect of the program has an “invitation to belong”⁸ as attendance at any event/activity is voluntary. A teacher recommends, a friend suggests or a student simply “shows up”. While conversations are appreciated for their contributions to academic learning, the content

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and delivery of information are part of a harmonious whole in which “*Education cannot be separated from nurturance*”.⁹

As in the oral traditions that form the foundation of Aboriginal societies, the experience of recognizing together common concerns, sharing stories and asking questions itself generates a new, shared history, “*connecting speaker and listener in communal experience and uniting past and present in memory.*”¹⁰

A Japanese-Canadian senior visiting History or Socials classes regularly to tell her story of internment after the Second World War has entered into a dialogue with students who are encouraged to ask her questions about any aspect of her experience so that their conversation has become a way to better understand the human experience behind the facts. While being part of the students’ learning journeys, these conversations are also part of this adult woman’s healing journey. The caring connection with youth along with the sense of belonging to her community is present each time they enter together into dialogue.

Share/Mastery

Contrary to the pre-conceptions and expectations of some of the participants at the Bridging the Gap forums, the information exchanged was usually shared in the form of personal stories rather than given as advice. Like Paulo Freire’s¹¹ concept of dialogue based on respect and mutual trust, conversations that take place through *Connecting*

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Generations are characterized by a withholding of judgement. The sensitivity to know when feedback is wanted comes with time and practice. The courage and the humility to accept feedback also grow over time and with confidence. Assessment of progress and the evaluation of learning outcomes are first and foremost based on whether the youth and the adult feel comfortable with one another.

Empathy and compassion surface when judgement takes a back seat and mastery flourishes in this non-judgemental environment. A 'third space' transforms the traditional teacher-student hierarchy into a relationship based on mutual trust where the student can teach and the teacher can learn. Curiosity arises naturally, competence grows with trust and collaboration is the natural *modus operandi*. Success becomes the “possession of the many”¹², neither competitive nor at the expense of others:

A professional photographer met with a Grade 12 student who was doing a project on portrait photography and felt confused about the direction in which the project was going. After meeting with him several times during the course of the year, she found her way with confidence and successfully completed the project:

Sometimes it's just a matter of encouragement and support. She is very bright and has the ability and an idea but didn't realize it. I just helped to lift the fog and focus her a bit so that she could see it clearly! (Adult mentor).

Learn/Independence

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The new “21st century” curriculum focuses on competencies rather than content I.e. on learning how to learn. In the natural sequence of events, if we feel secure and rooted, we are ready to explore our surroundings and to learn:

*To foster independence we must first invite dependence: to promote individuation we must provide a sense of belonging and unity.*¹³ In Aboriginal societies, independence

grows as skills develop and it is the responsibility of adults to guide youth towards maturity and self-sufficiency. We encourage adults mentoring students through

Connecting Generations to approach youth with respect and dignity, helping them to take on greater responsibility as they progress.

The openness of such exchanges, far from leading to the anarchy that some with a more traditional approach might fear, is the basis for *”The respectful and comfortable relationships that [form] between the youth and adults”* (Bridging the Gap workshops)

Rather than being a new approach to learning, our 21st century curriculum is based on the model of traditional societies where apprenticeship involved “modeling, scaffolding, fading and coaching”¹⁴. As the student becomes more skilled, the master gradually takes away the supports and the apprentice grows confident, independent and self-sufficient.

We encourage each participant in Connecting Generations, whether an adult showing a child how to build a birdhouse or a student coaching an adult in computer skills to follow this model so that the learner will become proficient in the skill without feeling dependent on someone else. An adult commented about her experience of being mentored in computer skills by a Grade 12 student: *“He was always very supportive and*

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at no time made me feel inadequate, which is a feeling I often get when faced with computer problems on my own.”

Give/Generosity

Learning to be self-sufficient means taking on responsibility for oneself and in a community of shared values, the welfare of others is never far away. According to Dan Pink in his book Drive¹⁵ “new” approaches to motivation at work, at school and at home are based on our needs for “autonomy, mastery and purpose”. A sense of purpose, rather than being the extrinsic rewards of good grades, scholarships and job references can naturally flourish in an environment where belonging, mastery and independence are already encouraged.

Connecting Generations supports the intrinsic rewards of generosity:

Our intergenerational Writers’ Group recently visited a classroom of Grade 6/7 students in order to deliver a workshop. We invited everyone in the classroom to join our “Writers’ of the Square Table”¹⁶. The first exercise was a letter from one’s future self to one’s present self. A younger student wrote about her aspirations to become a singer. A little later in the workshop, one of our youth writers spontaneously performed a song that she had never before sung in public, in order, as she later explained, to encourage the younger student to do the same. The Grade 6/7 student sang her song, in her native language, something she had

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never done before outside the longhouse, to the delight and appreciation of her classmates and teacher. Her grandmother who had recently died had taught her the song...

“My fav part [of the workshop] ...was Rosalie’s singing. She was so great and she sung like an angel. I was so happy and proud for her and of her.”(Grade 6/7 student)

It is our hope that programs like Connecting Generations are paving the way for a future where all youth will have the opportunity to join a “Circle of Courage”.

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References

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- ¹ Community Conversations: Mobilizing the Ideas, Skills, and Passion of Community Organizations, Governments, Business, and People. Paul Born BPS Books, Toronto 2008. p.20
- ² Forums designed for youth and adults to have conversations about career paths in different fields-Hospitality and Tourism, the Arts and Entrepreneurship, Health and the Helping professions, Business and Finance
- ³ Focus groups for youth and local website designers, graphic artists and photographers to create a website and brochure for Connecting Generations, while reflecting on 21st century employment skills.
- ⁴ The Gulf Islands School District 's Achievement Contract for 2009-10 reports a continuing commitment to “blurring the lines” between school and community:
http://www.sd64.bc.ca/dist_downloads/achievement0910.pdf
- ⁵ The 'third space,' a concept identified by Homi K. Bhabha (1994), describes the possibility for the creation of a hybrid cultural identity which occurs when 2 different social groups meet and form a new, common identity related to the space they have shared and the dialogue in which they have engaged.
Homi K. Bhabha (1994)
- ⁶ Writing Alone Together, Wendy Judith Cutler, Lynda Monk & Ahava Shira. Butterfly Press.Victoria. 2014. based on the practices of Writing Alone Together⁶ – writing freely, reading aloud, listening deeply and bearing witness.
- ⁷ These responses were written jointly by members of the group during one of our meetings in response to the question “What is the Writers’ Group?”
- ⁸ Reclaiming Youth At Risk: Our Hope for the Future. Larry K. Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg, Steve Van Bockern. Solution Tree Press. Bloomington 1990. p.85
- ⁹ Brendtro, Brokenleg, Van Bockern. Solution Tree Press. Bloomington 1990. p.98
- ¹⁰ Introduction: A Layering of Voices: Aboriginal Oral Traditions in Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Theory, Practice,Ethics Fernwood Publishing. 2008.Nova Scotia p.7
Renée Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod
- ¹¹ Freire's concept of 'dialogue' is founded on love, faith, and humility
- ¹² Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern. p.51
- ¹³ Hold On to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers. Gordon Neufeld, Gabor Mate. Vintage Canada.Toronto. 2004. p.116

¹⁴ See “Cognitive Apprenticeship: Making Thinking Visible”.

<http://www.21learn.org/archive/cognitive-apprenticeship-making-thinking-visible/>

¹⁵ Drive: The Surprising Truth About what Motivates Us. Daniel Pink. Riverhead Books. New York. 2011.

¹⁶ “Writers of the Square Table” is the name given by members to the writers’ group this year.